

The Invisible Student: Undocumentation and Its Effects on UIUC Students

"Throughout our history, immigrants have come to America, established themselves and been joined by other members of their families. That process has brought us energetic individuals and strong families who have enriched our economy and way of life."

(Stuart Anderson, *The Los Angeles Times*, February 1996)

Immigration is not a new concept to the United States. Since about the turn of the twentieth century, immigrants have been coming to the US in search of a better life for themselves and their loved ones. Immigrants from all around the world migrated to the United States in large numbers because of oppression in their homelands. They have taken on many struggles throughout their travels and encountered more when arriving in the US. When these people came here they were met as downcasts and forced into a position of being lower class due to the jobs they had to do. Established Americans had actually created a society with themselves as upper class, because they had more expendable money and therefore needed a slave class to do the jobs no one else wanted to do. The people in the lower jobs were discriminated not only by keeping them in the worst job, but also by labeling them with derogatory titles.

During the 1980s, the number of people of Mexican origin in this country grew at five times the rate of the population as a whole. This surge was fueled by two factors: a high birthrate and the largest immigrant influx by any national group in American history (Digital History, 2008). Immigration to the United States was driven by the rapid growth of Mexico's population and by the wages in the United States being at least six times higher than those in Mexico.

According to McLemore (1993), it has been very difficult to accept the immigration model when it comes to Mexican American. The problem is that members of the host

society did not distinguish between the "colonized" Mexicans and the "immigrant" Mexicans. The current group of immigrants could not do well in the same kinds of jobs, housing, and subservience as the previous immigrants. From this viewpoint, Mexicans who have come to the United States since the Anglo American conquest, even those who have come since 1900, have merely joined the ranks of the existing colonized Mexican American minority.

As of today, Americans are very aware of the impact of immigration to the US. In 1965, the United States remove quotas that, had once, limited the number of people who could come from certain parts of the world. The current movement of migrants to the United States has had a huge impact on political and social ideologies, prompting tremendous public debates. The questions that have been raised deal with issues such as bilingual education and immigration restriction. These political debates have made it harder for any immigrant coming to the US.

Our research allowed us to explore some of the aspects of Latino/a student life on campus. Our main focus is to understand the differences between the experience of undocumented students (or students from undocumented families) and those of documented status. As part of our research, we have conducted interviews with three undergraduate students, one graduate student, and one administrator regarding the different experiences of students on campus. We found that the individuals we interviewed share some ideas about the lack of resources for undocumented students and students coming from undocumented families. Our main argument with this research project is that students of undocumented status, as well as students from undocumented families, face many obstacles due to lack of resources when pursuing higher education at the University of

Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

One of the volunteers that we were able to interview for this project was an undergraduate student that we have chosen to call Maria. During her interview, she told us what she considered to be the biggest differences between documented and undocumented students when it came to applying to college. Throughout the interview, Maria was very open and honest with the answers she gave us. She did not hesitate to answer any of our questions and instead was very enthusiastic when she was responding. Maria explained that she considered herself lucky because her mother was able to help her fill out college applications and financial aid forms. Having at least one parent somewhat familiar with financial aid forms and college applications was a very helpful bonus for her. Maria explained that both of her parents were documented but that it was only her mother that had had previous experience with filling out financial aid forms for college. She shared with us that her best friend, who is an undocumented student, had many problems filling out financial aid applications because her parents did not have a social security number; this is a very important part of the application. Maria also told us that she felt that it was very important to continue with an education because of the rewards later on in life; she mentioned getting a better job as one of the immediate rewards. She also told us that with a good education, Latinos/as could become better role models for others in the community and would change the way that other people look down on them or treat them as though they were inferior. In terms of social life, Maria told us that she thought that it would be harder for undocumented students to get into bars (which is a common social activity for university students) because they might not have the proper identification. She did not go into further details about how social life affects documented and undocumented students

differently.

When we asked Maria whether she thought there were any resources offered to undocumented students or students coming from undocumented families, she shared a story with us. She said that she had a friend in high school who was very smart and graduated in the top percentage of her class but she was undocumented. Maria's friend was not able to fill out the financial aid papers that are required when applying to college, and instead got married right after high school. Maria told us that now her friend has children and that she might not ever go back to school. She feels that it is very important to have workshops or similar resources, beginning in high school, which will help students, like her friend, with the college application process, filling out financial aid forms and even providing them with mentors that will share their experiences with prospective college students. As far as resources, here on campus for Latino students, Maria feels that there aren't any - or at least she has not heard of any. She did, however, mention the Bridge Program, but was not sure if she would consider that a resource.

Maria's interview was very insightful. We learned that as a documented student with documented parents, Maria had some advantage when it came time to apply for college and financial aid. She did not have to struggle, like undocumented students do, when she was filling out all of the financial aid forms. It was also clear during the interview that Maria was very concerned about finding ways that Latino students in high school could get help with the college application process. To her, it was very important that resources be offered to students as early as possible so that they have an opportunity to attend a college and get a higher education.

We were fortunate enough to have been able to interview an Associate Director of

Admissions for the University because we wanted to get the perspective of an administrator. Hector, as we have chosen to call him, was very helpful and willing to answer all of the questions we asked him. From the beginning of the interview with him, Hector told us that he felt it was very important to help out Latino students who come to this university, especially if they are undocumented. He explained that because all of the records at the University are public, the admissions office does not "keep tabs" on undocumented students. He said that he guessed that there were between 20 to 25 undocumented students enrolled; he could not tell us an actual number since they do not keep a record of undocumented students. Hector went on to explain that of these few undocumented students who were enrolled, only about a quarter of them complete their studies and graduate from the University. According to him, there are a few problems that these undocumented students encounter along the way that affect their ability to complete their degree. For example, the cost of attendance proves to be a significant problem for undocumented students. Because neither they nor their parents have a social security number, they are not able to fill out the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid); this prevents them from getting federal funds and many scholarships. Another problem arises around the issue of employment after graduation; even if an undocumented student can finish college and obtain a degree, he or she will not be able to find a job because of his or her legal status. The only other solution that these students have is to return to their home country and try to find a job there. Hector told us that he believes that the ideal solution to this would be to pass laws that will help undocumented students get a higher education. For now, however, he says that some students are choosing to attend a community college because it is cheaper than a 4-year university and because they will at

least learn a vocation. Hector also mentioned other areas where undocumented students would have problems. He said that getting a driver's license was very important, but it was very hard for undocumented students to accomplish this. These students would also face problems if they tried to open a bank account because they would need a social security number. Taking part in student activism groups and events was also problematic for undocumented students because of the fear of them being caught. These kinds of problems that these students can and have encountered have also affected their social life.

After Hector told us what he considered to be some of the major difficulties that Latino undocumented students faced when coming to the University, we asked him about any resources that he knew about or would like to see that will benefit these students. After thinking about it for about a few moments, Hector told us that he did not think there were any resources for undocumented students. His answer was based mostly on the issue of the lack of financial aid for these students. He told us that there were just a few scholarships that were available to undocumented students; these scholarships did not ask about an applicant's legal status. Aside from monetary aid as a resource, Hector believes that being honest with these students is very important. He feels that it is important to tell undocumented students that they can enroll at the University, but that they will more than likely incur a large debt by the time they finish and that they will not be able to find a job after they graduate. However, these students also need to know that there are people here at the University - such as cultural centers and student organizations - that are willing to help them.

The interview with Hector provided us with the perspective of an administrator who has worked with students of undocumented background and has been able to think about

ways in which the University can help these students. Hector strongly believed in the importance of completing a higher education not only for undocumented students, but for Latino students in general. The students who do succeed at obtaining a degree and finding a job become role models for others in their communities. These same students are more susceptible to volunteer in their communities and to want to give back. Hector mentioned that he had received scholarships when he was attending school and they helped him greatly. Now he tries to give back to the community by helping students who are coming in to the University. If we want to see more people like Hector in our communities, it is important to find ways to help students finish school.

Our interview with Susana, a graduate student here at the University, provided us with a graduate student's perspective on this matter. During the interview, Susana was very honest and open when she answered our questions. She seemed to be comfortable talking about the issue even though we conducted the interview in a public place.

Susana began by saying that she really did not know how to answer the question about how a student's social life was affected because of their legal status. She said that she had not encountered any examples of this while conducting her research or in her everyday life. She did, however, say that she thought that student's of color encountered many problems in their academic lives but that undocumented students encountered even more problems. The problems that she was referring to were mostly regarding financial aid for students. She said that it was extremely difficult for undocumented students to be able to receive any aid. Susana also talked a bit about the importance of continuing on with an education for Latino students, both documented and undocumented. She said that it was important for parents to encourage their children to continue going to school. However, even if Latino

students do try to attain a higher level of education, they are faced with various problems. Susana said that because of the problems that these students face, they have higher levels of anxiety. She mentioned that a couple of years ago, there was a publication that published several undocumented students' personal information. Afterwards, these students were harassed and threatened. Susana believes that this incident produced a great deal of anxiety for these students; they no longer felt safe at the University. She also touched upon the fact that there are different levels of anxiety that affect different students.

She said that here at the University, there are some resources that student could use to deal with the many anxieties they might have. One of these resources is the Counseling Center; however, she brought into question the counselors' ability to handle this issue. Later on, she also mentioned that La Casa is also a resource for students. Susana believes that they should develop a database that can inform the students about different opportunities such as scholarships and other forms of financial aid. This would be specially beneficial to undocumented students who do not have many options when it comes to paying for school.

Susana seemed to be very confident about everything that she was informing us about; this is a good thing since many students who talk about the issue about being undocumented or documented when they are in the minority they rather want to avoid it. Even though she herself is a documented student, she had many dreams and goals on how to help her colleagues at the undergraduate level to succeed in life. This says so much about her that she is very thoughtful person and is willing to voice her voice for the rights of others. We need more Latinos like Susana to help many of the Latinos who are undergraduates and are struggling with financial problems when its dealing with tuition. Many of us would agree

with her that every Latino needs to try to achieve a higher education if they are able to. A question that we should have asked her was about what kind of information she would give undergraduates who are in the undocumented status and trying to pursue a career in life.

Our only undergraduate male interviewee was Juan who confided in us that he was undocumented. He is a transfer student from Parkland College, which means that he is a junior at the University of Illinois and majoring in Political Science. He told us that a main disadvantage of being an undocumented student is getting money to pay college tuition. He also told us that he was able to get a few private scholarships, but even the scholarships are not giving him enough to pay tuition. A second disadvantage that he has by being undocumented is that he is not able to do a study abroad. He said he would like to go to another country, but is unable to because he is able to go and not come back home. He informed us that he is able to pay college with the private scholarships that he has, his parents help, and that some relatives down in his country are getting a loan and sending it to him, but later he and his family will pay them. He also mentioned that he has a lot of support coming from his family to continue with school and to not give up just because of his status. He said that, in a sense, being an undocumented family has made them more united and has helped them strive for their goals. He also told us that him and his family have lived in the U.S. for the past eight years. A main reason why he is achieving a higher education is that he wants to have a better life with a higher education.

Regarding the resources that the University needs to offer the Latino students, he mentioned that they should offer more scholarships for undocumented students that are trying to achieve a higher education. Mainly he said that they should offer more scholarships that do not require a social security number. He also mentioned that another

resource would be to help them find a job; he knows that it is going to be hard to find a job because of his status in the U.S. For this reason, he said that he is moving back to his home country, Costa Rica. He mentioned that it would be easier to get a job and have a life in Costa Rica than in the U.S.

We conducted the interview at the Illini Union where many people were going to be able to hear our conversation with him. One thing that I noticed in him was that he was very open with us in the interview. Many undocumented students would probably feel intimidated when someone asks them these types of questions, but Juan was not intimidated at all. He was very cooperative with my group members and myself. A second thing that I noticed in him was that he felt very confident about himself while being interviewed.

All that was said by Juan is true about how undocumented students will not be able to practice their majors if they are required to have a social security number when applying for a job. Many students' and their families' dream is to see them finish school, yet many are not able to do so because there is no money for them to do so. Many students, like Juan, have dreams such as studying abroad, but because they are will not be able to come back to their families after they are done with the semester out of the country they do not even think on doing it. It is good that families are still united and do not separate themselves from each other just because of their status in this country. It is also wonderful to see how the status does not stop these students from continuing with their education even if they struggle at the moment to pay tuition or later to find a job.

Finally, we interviewed a female undergraduate who was also undocumented. We called this interviewee Sara, and she is a freshman at the University. She is working on her

Psychology major, but she says that she might change her major to Sociology with a minor in Latino/a Studies. She was born in Mexico, but her parents brought her when she was five years old. When they first came to the U.S., they established themselves in Chicago. She mentioned that some disadvantages that undocumented students have is that there is no financial aid given to them. She is able to pay some of her tuition with a private scholarship that was given to her in high school. Another way that she is able to pay tuition is with the help of her mom's boss who they have known for many years and is willing to help them with whatever they need. She mentioned that she has an older brother that also comes here to the University and that he will be graduating this coming May. She sees that he has a hard time finding a job because he is undocumented. She told us that sometimes she just wants to give up with her education because she can see herself in the same situation as her brother after finishing school. In her further education, she looks forward to going to graduate school, but that she does not know whether that will happen because of the tuition money that is not offered to them. When it was asked why was she looking forward to a higher education she said that it was forced by her parents to get a college education.

Her social life, as she said, is a little hidden just because she thinks that if she uses her matricula, a Mexican ID, they will know that she is undocumented. She thinks that they might question why she does not have a state ID or driver's license. She even used the word "embarrassment" when she was referring to the use of her matricula.

When asked about the resources that La Casa Cultural Latina offers she said that at first she was not given any information about resources and that there was no mentioning of La Colectiva. She said that there should be more educational resources given to the undocumented students when they walk into La Casa. In addition, she said that there

should be more social support given to the undocumented students from the administrators at La Casa. She talked about how La Casa should have a network that explains what graduate students did to follow their same path.

The setting was the same as the previous interview, at the Illini Union. We went to a place that was quiet and, at the time, perfect since there were barely any other people around. When we started the interview, she seemed very comfortable answering the questions we were asking her, but when people were coming close to the area where we were her voice volume started to lower. After this, I knew that she was not feeling comfortable with the interview. She never said anything about moving to another place; we stayed there until the end of the interview and she continued answering the questions fine just with a lower volume of voice. In addition, she seemed a little ashamed of telling us that she uses a matricula as her ID to get into places. It seemed as if she did not want to show that she was Mexican to other people, but she did not mention this directly to us. Sara mentioned the same thing as Juan about not being able to find a job after they are done with school to practice their degree. She also mentioned a good point about how La Casa should be more informative to the Latinos students in general, but more to those who are undocumented about different scholarships they can apply for to pay tuition. La Casa should be telling the students about different groups/clubs that help those who are undocumented or the minorities in general. Finally, I thought that it was good how Sara said that her parents gave no other option to continue with a higher education; this says a lot about what parents really come here for, and that their legal status does not affect whether you can go to school or not.

Immigration between the United States and Latin America and the laws that

regulate it have a great affect not only for students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, but for students all over the country. The challenges undocumented students go beyond what the average citizen of this country might even begin to imagine. This situation is nothing new. In 1982 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Plyler v. Doe* that children of undocumented immigrants cannot be denied basic education on the basis of their parents' status (Karlin, 2007). However, this basic education stops after high school. If undocumented students want to pursue higher education at a university, they may find themselves at a dead end. A common problem undocumented university students face is being unable to pay for or find ways to pay for tuition. Many laws have been enacted in order to help their situation, but each have proved to be not enough. Many states have passed laws enabling undocumented students to pay in-state tuition, which here at the University of Illinois, is three times cheaper than out of state tuition (Hebel, 2007). However, many other states, such as Arizona, have traveled in the opposite direction and passed laws preventing undocumented student from paying in state tuition on the basis that taxpayers' dollars should not be going toward the education of people who disobey the laws of the country (Hebel, 2007).

Unfortunately, what advocates of these laws do not realize is that through what they believe to be setting examples for people who disregard the law, they are hurting young adults who have lived in this country for most of their lives, who had no choice when their parents brought them over the border. These people know only this country, so we can assume that they are here to stay. By passing laws that make higher education harder for them to obtain, we are prohibiting them a way to become more productive members of our communities. According to Hector, Associate Director of Admissions at the University of

Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, it is important for students of undocumented status to go to college because getting an education means one will be much more likely to be able to give back to the community, for example, they will be much more likely to become a role model for people who have been in the same situation.

Instead of emphasizing negativity, society should be allowing these students of undocumented status a way to develop their capabilities and show others that there is a way out. This country needs more professionals and by limiting who is able to achieve higher education is limiting the number of educated and skilled professionals in the community. When asked the question why they believed higher education was important for undocumented students, every person we talked to said the same thing: in order to stop the cycle. Providing education provides options for people who may feel like they do not have any. Being forced to pay out of state tuition could be the breaking point for students who would otherwise go to college. In our interview with Maria, she told us a story about her friend from high school who was really smart and at the top of her class. However, she was also undocumented and was discouraged when it came to going to college. Instead, she got married and had a child. Maria stressed to us that her friend really did want to go to college, yet did not even know how to fill out the application form. Intelligent student, such as Maria's friend, are discouraged from going to college.

As a community, we should be concerned that such potential is being wasted due to lack of resources for undocumented students and we need to do more to help them obtain a college degree if we want them to contribute to our society, which seems to be the argument for denying them an education in the first place: lack of investment in the community and placing the burden on taxpayers. However, the question we need to be

asking ourselves is what will happen to these people if they are not going to college? Which will benefit the country more in the future, excluding undocumented students, or educating them? All of the undocumented students we have talked to seemed extremely focused on their studies and expressed interest in helping others. It is unfair that their parents' choice to immigrate to the US in search of a better life should have such a negative impact on them. Most immigrants and their families are here to stay. The laws this country enacts in response to immigration and the overall attitude and stereotypes toward immigrants portrays them as criminals and a drain on society. Instead of punishing undocumented students, institutions like the University of Illinois should become the vehicle for these students affected by immigration to get educated and allow them to give back to the community and to the country that they refer to as home.

Reference

Anderson, Stuart. The Los Angeles Times, February 1996.

Hebel, Sara. 2007. "Arizona's Colleges Are in the Crosshairs of Efforts to Curb Illegal Immigration." Chronicle of Higher Education, Vol. 54: electronic version.

Hector. Personal Interview. 4/08/08.

Juan. Personal Interview. 4/10/08.

Karlin, Sarah. 2007. "The Invisible Class." American School Board Journal, Vol. 194: electronic version.

Maria. Personal Interview. 4/03/08.

McLemore, Dale S. Racial and Ethnic Relations in America. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1993.

Mintz, S. 2007. Digital History. Retrieved (April 22, 2008) from <http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu>

Sara. Personal Interview. 4/17/08.

Susana. Personal Interview. 4/16/08.